

# 1 *Chapter 1*

## INTRODUCTION

### A Sustainable City



# 1.1 Introduction

## Foundations of the Plan

### Chronology of Events

**June 1996:** Burlington Municipal Development Plan calls for:

- Protection of all natural areas of local significance through land acquisition, conservation easements, zoning ordinances, appropriate management and education effort

- Implementation of a land conservation program and fund to purchase natural areas or easements, including the adoption of a development impact fee dedicated to natural area purchases

**February 1997:** City Council Resolution calls for the establishment of a Burlington Conservation Fund Working Group

**July 1997:** City Council Resolution calls for the creation of a Natural Areas and Open Space Protection Plan which will:

- Identify and map Burlington's significant natural areas and open spaces

- Prioritize areas for protection based in significance and threat

- Recommend appropriate protection measures for each of these areas

- Define responsibilities for implementation of natural areas/open space protection plan

- Recommend timelines for implementation of natural areas/open space protection measures

**July 1997:** the Conservation Board sponsors a Natural Areas Community Forum

Burlington's natural environment is a chief ingredient in the city's character - making it one of the most attractive and inviting small cities in the country. Burlington's citizens, non-profits, and government have a proud tradition of protecting what is important to them and what sets Burlington apart - its sense of place, natural environment, open spaces, and recreational opportunities.

Recent studies throughout the country have debunked the myth that conservation and development are inherently at odds. The fact is that open space conservation is good for everyone - residents, property owners, visitors, and businesses alike - and their bottom line. This is a fact that Burlington clearly recognizes and has long benefited.

However, open space in Burlington is dwindling. While larger developments downtown and on the waterfront receive most of the attention, smaller developments are slowing consuming remaining open space, and encroaching upon important natural and recreational systems highly valued by the community. Neighborhood opposition to new development is on the increase as residents sense a threat to their quality of life. A comprehensive plan to identify and protect the city's most vulnerable natural areas and significant open spaces has become a necessity.

City Master Plans drafted in 1991 and 1996 catalogued the City's natural areas and documented significant losses in size and number. To redress this trend, these plans recommended a land conservation program and fund for natural areas protection. The City Council authorized the Conservation Board to investigate the need, purpose, and feasibility of this strategy, and to develop this plan for implementation. To achieve this goal, the Board formed a working group

consisting of members of the Conservation Board, City representatives, and the Trust for Public Land.

### **Core Elements of an Open Space Strategy**

In creating any land conservation strategy, planners face tough decisions and questions. They must balance the need for future growth and development with preservation of greenspace, and find ways to choose between potential conservation areas in the face of limited resources and funding. This dilemma raises critical questions: Which area is more threatened? Which is more sensitive? Which will most enhance the values of surrounding areas? How will protection affect development options? Who will pay?

This *Open Space Protection Plan* establishes a framework by which the City of Burlington can: 1) inventory and evaluate natural areas and important open space, 2) prioritize areas for protection, and 3) match high-priority sites with appropriate protection and management strategies.

This plan is composed of four segments which:

- Discusses the benefits of open space in an urban community (Chapter 2);
- Documents the status of open space within the city (Chapter 3);
- Presents a framework for future open space protection (Chapter 4); and,
- Outlines a recommended plan for implementation (Chapter 5).

### **The Burlington Conservation Board**

The charge of the Burlington Conservation Board is to ensure that natural resource and recreation issues are considered and incorporated in City decisions. The Board is composed of volunteer citizens with diverse backgrounds in conservation, law, and policy. The Conservation Board represents the interests of the city both at-large and by ward. The Board serves as an advisory body to the Planning Commission, Zoning Board of Adjustment, and the City Council on natural resource, environmental protection and land conservation issues with its functions and responsibilities defined by the state statute and the local enabling resolution.

# 1.2 Definitions of Natural Areas and Open Space

Open space is more than just undeveloped land. It includes city greens and treebelts as well as conservation areas and parks. Patches and corridors of open space interspersed throughout the urban landscape weave the fabric of the city together. Together they add natural beauty, provide recreational opportunities, and act as a circulatory system for the city's natural processes such as wildlife movement and hydrological flows. Open space is an integral part of any healthy city.

The City of Burlington is particularly concerned with two categories of open space:

- 1) Open and undisturbed sites with high natural, recreational, and scenic value; and,
- 2) Small pockets or corridors of greenspace within high density neighborhoods and commercial areas.

While the primary focus of this Plan is on the natural and undeveloped forms of open space, public opinion was very clear about the importance of enhancing the most urbanized areas of the city through additional greenspace and good urban design. While this topic is largely beyond the scope of this effort, a framework for further study and protection is outlined. A subsequent amendment in coming years will be prepared to address ways to conserve and enhance urban greenspaces throughout the city.

## Functions and Values

Perhaps the best way to define open space is by function. Burlington's open spaces can be defined and identified by the role they plan in the community and range of benefits they provide. In most cases, any one site will fall within more than one part of the definition. This definition has been developed from the core values expressed by the public as part of the planning process. It serves to provide a framework for prioritization of land parcels, as well

as for protection and management strategies tailored to Burlington

## Natural areas of local significance and lands with natural values and functions

These are lands with outstanding natural resources. Sustainable forest communities and land containing important wildlife habitat, as well as lands with significant geological and topographical features are included in this category. Lands that serve important natural functions such as wetlands, streams, wildlife habitat corridors and lands that treat stormwater and urban runoff.

- Open spaces with natural values include areas such as the North Beach Wetland, Lone Rock Point, Centennial Woods, and Derway Island.

## Working Lands

Working lands provide direct economic and/or functional benefit including those available for agricultural use including community gardens, and forested areas suitable for management. Open lands with functional value include riparian strips, hedgerows and windbreaks.

- Working lands include large portions of the Intervale, woodlands in Leddy Park and the Arms Grant, neighborhood community gardens, and streambank buffers..

## Lands with scenic values

The visual beauty of open spaces helps to define Burlington's character. The City would not be the same without the natural views and aesthetic qualities offered by its open space. These lands include both views points and viewsheds, as well as roadsides, greenways, and natural strips.

- Open spaces with scenic values include Ethan Allen Park, the Intervale and the Lakeshore.

*Webster's Dictionary* defines the words "open" and "space" as follows:

**open 1.** not closed or barred: an *open field* **9.** relatively unoccupied by buildings, fences, trees, etc.

**82. a.** the unenclosed or unobstructed country **b.** the outdoors: *vacation in the open*

**space 1.** the unlimited or indefinitely great three dimensional expanse **7.** linear distance, a particular distance: *trees set at equal spaces*

The Nature Conservancy (1975) defines a "natural area" as:

An area of land or water which: 1) either retains or has reestablished its natural character, although it need not be completely undisturbed, or which 2) retains unusual flora, fauna, geological or similar features of scientific or educational interest.



the Burlington Intervale

The core values and benefits derived from open space and natural areas in Burlington include:

**Natural Systems**

- Wildlife corridors
- Water, nutrient flows
- Air quality

**Working Lands**

- Agriculture
- Forestry

**Aesthetic**

- Lake/mountain vistas
- View corridors

**Recreation and Education**

- Public access
- Passive recreation
- Research

**Historical, Cultural, Archeological**

- Historic sites and landscapes
- Cultural sites
- Archeological resources and research

**Geographic distribution of Open Space**

- High density neighborhoods
- Low income areas

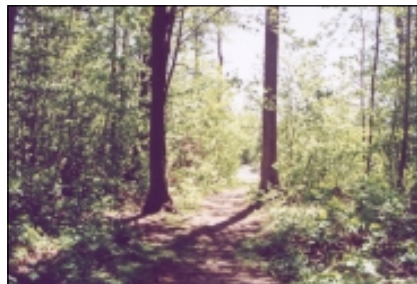
**Other Urban Benefits**

- Attraction for new development
- Enhancement to commercial activity
- Stabilize and enhance property values
- Stabilize demand for City Services
- A place for spiritual reflection

***Lands with recreational and educational values***

Burlington has an extensive system of public parks, trails, and vacant lots which provide passive recreational opportunities such as hiking, biking, skiing, picnicking, and photography.

- Open spaces with recreational and educational values include the Bikepath, Ethan Allen Park, and the Intervale.



A well-worn trail winds through the woods off of North Avenue in Burlington.

***Lands with historical, cultural, or archaeological values***

These lands include archaeological, historical, cultural, and religious sites.

- Open spaces with historical, cultural, or archaeological values include the Intervale, UVM Historic Green, and Ethan Allen Park.

***Urban open space lands***

These are open spaces with values specific to Burlington's urban setting, such as urban and campus greens, streetscapes, treebelts, parks and cemeteries. All of these aspects provide opportunities for integrating nature into the cityscape.

- Open spaces such as these include city parks including City Hall Park and Waterfront Park; campus greens and lawns; street tree corridors; and neighborhood pocket parks.



the Burlington waterfront

***Ruth Page on Open Space***

So far, we're pretty lucky in Burlington. When we need to get away from sun-hot, noisy streets and sidewalks and escape the smell of car exhaust, we can visit Ethan Allen Park to listen to the rustling of leaves and inhale air freshened by the oxygen-giving trees. A squirrel ripples across the path, a chipmunk skitters under the leaves, we sit alone on a high rock or look across the lively whitecaps of Lake Champlain to the ancient mountains on the far shore, and with a sigh, we're at peace. Our bodies relax and our minds seem to do the same; everyday worries fade, and life seems clearer. We might even have a sudden vision of where we packed away those photographs the family's been hunting for.

We have two other sizable, life-enriching open-space choices in our city: the farms, wildflower areas, winding paths and meandering Winooski of the Intervale; or the splendid landscape at the foot of our busiest streets. Do open spaces make a difference in our lives? How could they not—we humans evolved with Nature. Of COURSE we still get our deepest strengths from her gifts.

*Ruth Page, a noted commentator on Vermont Public Radio, is also a Burlington resident.*

# 1.3 Public Opinion

## From the Vision to the Plan

Open Space is for the people of Burlington - present and future. To reflect this, public participation has been an integral element in the development of the *Burlington Open Space Protection Plan*.

Four neighborhood meetings were held in locations throughout Burlington to introduce the Plan and collect citizen feedback. Two newsletters were published and posted throughout the City to update the people of Burlington on the Plan's progress. An informal survey was conducted through a display board at the Fletcher Free Library. A professional poll was conducted gauge the level of support for an open space initiative in Burlington, as well as to determine which aspects of land conservation are most important to residents. A series of meetings were held to discuss draft proposals of the Plan. And finally, the Plan was brought before several integral citizen boards and commissions for formal adoption and buy-in.

### Neighborhood Meetings

The neighborhood meeting series began on February 17, 1998 at the Electric Department Auditorium. Subsequent meetings were held on February 22, February 24, and March 3 at the Police Station, Heineburg Senior Center, and Fletcher Free Library, respectively.

At each meeting, Burlington residents came out to discuss their concerns for open space, and ideas about the budding Plan. Citizens cited several concerns, including the importance of public access to open space as well as the importance of monitoring and managing public open space lands once they are protected. Residents

discussed the diverse values that open spaces have for them, from wildlife habitat to recreation, to visual aesthetics. Also cited was the need to balance conservation with development, considering Burlington's role as a regional growth center.

The public response to the Plan has been overwhelmingly positive. Citizens lobbied for the preservation of their favorite places, such as Centennial Woods, the Lake Champlain Waterfront, the Intervale, and the Englesby Ravine, while others suggested projects such as neighborhood clean-ups of existing open spaces. Residents recognize that Burlington is a special city which puts a high value on the outdoors, and that with this Plan, Burlington has an opportunity to set the standard for open space protection.

### The Survey

Many people responded to a survey posted on a display board in the Fletcher Free Library and distributed at public meetings. Overwhelming, respondents have been supportive of the creation of an open space protection initiative in Burlington, and most vowed to support the City's efforts to preserve open space through donations to an Open Space Conservation Fund.

Survey respondents were also asked to name their favorite places in Burlington. Responses varied greatly, from City Hall Park to North Beach, from the bikepath to Centennial Woods, from the Barge Canal to the Intervale. While some residents prefer active recreation activities such as biking and trail running, others get satisfaction just from the knowl-

Planning ideas from Burlington residents:

*"Each resident should have access to open spaces in the City on any particular day."*

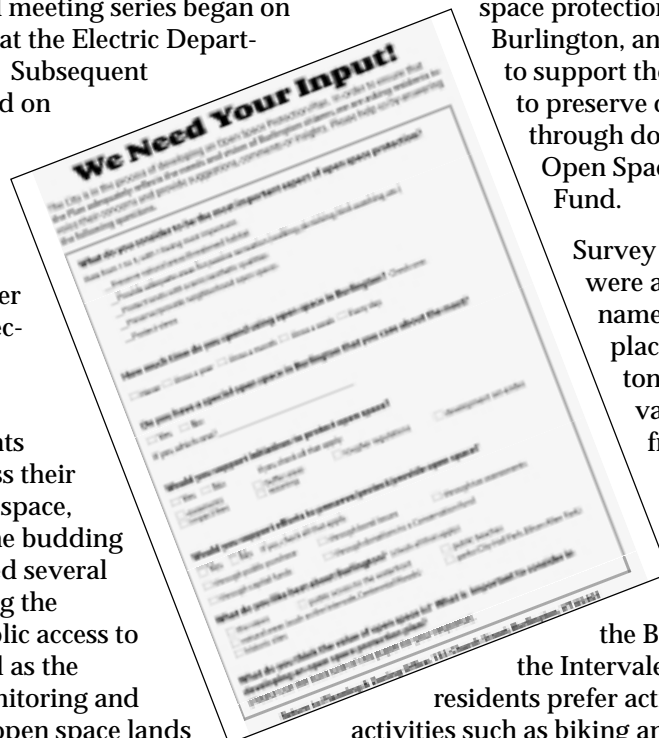
*"The City needs unorganized spaces for recreation."*

*"The City needs a diversity of animal life."*

*"This open space plan is very important. Burlington's natural areas are wonderful. We need new zoning for natural areas; there's a difference between those and parks."*

*"Small places are important. They are heavily used and need attention."*

*"A unique trail experience could be created in Burlington."*



Thoughts from Burlington residents:

*"Burlington can set the standard for open space."*

*"Open spaces should reflect Burlington's unique geographic location."*

*"Burlington's natural areas and views define its character and quality of life."*

edge that their city contains valuable natural areas. In fact, when asked to rank the goals of open space protection, a majority of survey respondents chose "preserve natural areas/threatened habitat" as the most important goal, with "provide adequate areas for passive recreation" in a close second place.

Listed below are representative comments from the four public meetings and the survey posed at the Fletcher Free Library, divided into categories.

#### **Neighborhood Open Spaces...**

- *Small places are important, heavily used, need attention...examples are Archibald, H.O, Wheeler.*
- *Englesby Brook could be a "kids' haven".*
- *Opportunity for contiguous open space from park to NE Landshare parcel to north of Starr Farm Road.*
- *City needs unorganized spaces for recreation.*
- *Open Space around communities define edges, keep human scale.*
- *Preserve back yards.*
- *Oakledge, Red Rocks, and South Park do serve South End residents.*
- *Neighborhoods should be focused on open space.*
- *There is little open space in the Old North End. This low-income community is quite dense and needs more open space than the less congested parts of town and more affluent people who can drive to open spaces. Thank you for doing all this work.*
- *Think 100 years ahead...use all means to save small, but important areas.*

#### **Concerns regarding development...**

- *Zoning caters to developers too much.*
- *Very important...Burlington's natural areas are wonderful...need new zoning for natural areas-there's a difference between those and parks.*
- *Inventory all ordinances that relate to open space.*
- *Review process for subdivision is backwards-o.s. last thing considered.*

#### **Value of Open Space to the City...**

- *I think the value of open space is to preserve natural beauty of Vermont which still exists in Burlington. It is rare to have a beautiful city, but we can keep Burlington open, natural, and beautiful. Open space also lets people go outside and enjoy physical activities.*
- *Vermont seems to let public use private land more than other places. This is threatened.*
- *Open spaces should mirror/reflect Burlington's unique geographic location.*
- *Open space which is accessible-contiguous open space.*
- *Open space is an acknowledgment and recognition of our necessary and sacred relationship with the planet. Without it we ultimately wither and die.*

#### **Habitats and Natural Open Spaces...**

- *Health of wildlife in "wild" areas (rabies a problem)...management to address wildlife.*
- *Wildlife diversity/wild area in city.*
- *Study to look at wildlife travel corridors.*
- *Difference between urban park and wildlife preserve...address this diversity in the plan.*

Based on the public input obtained through neighborhood meetings and an informal survey, Burlington's residents showed a strong interest in supporting an open space protection plan. The aspects of open space that Burlington's residents found most important were:

- Preservation of small open spaces which unify neighborhoods.
- Protection of open space from threatening development and subdivision.
- Connecting existing open spaces.
- Preservation of the City's natural beauty.



## **The Poll**

As a part of the planning process, opinion research consultants Kiley & Company were hired by The Trust for Public Land, Inc. to conduct a poll of 400 registered Burlington voters from April 25 through April 28, 1999.

The purpose of this survey was to gauge public attitudes toward the general issue of open space protection, and to assist policy-makers in designing an open space protection strategy for Burlington.

The poll found that a majority of respondents would overwhelmingly support a City initiative to preserve open space. Highlights from results of the poll are summarized below.

- 69% of those asked thought that having more parks and natural areas will make Burlington a more livable city and improve the quality of life for all residents.
  - 81% agreed that protecting parks and natural areas along Lake Champlain and the Winooski River will cut down on pollution and keep local waters safe for fishing, swimming, and boating.
  - 74% of respondents would be even more positive about the program to protect open space if City funds for land protection could be leveraged with matching funds from state and federal sources.
- Acquiring more open land to protect it from development ranked 2nd in a list of steps voters feel would do the most to improve the quality of life in Burlington.
  - Voters strongly supported the creation of a program to purchase open space even if paid for, in part, by taxing themselves.
  - The following are the types of resources respondents said that such a program should protect, in order of priority:
    1. Parks and natural areas along Lake Champlain and the Winooski River that help protect water quality.
    2. Natural habitats for plants, birds, and wildlife.
    3. Scenic views of Lake Champlain and the mountains.
    4. Open land on the downtown waterfront.
    5. Agricultural lands in the Intervale.
    6. Historic and cultural sites.
    7. Neighborhood parks and playgrounds.
    8. Hiking trails and bike paths.



Burlington residents enjoy an autumn stroll through Ethan Allen Park.